

VZCZCXRO4706

RR RUEHCD RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHLA RUEHMRE RUEHSR

DE RUEHKB #0277 0530925

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

R 220925Z FEB 06

FM AMEMBASSY BAKU

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9683

INFO RUCNOSC/ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN EUROPE

UNCLAS BAKU 000277

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC, EUR/PPD, AND EUR/SNEC

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958:N/A

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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI PUBLIC DISMISSES N-K TALKS AS "TOILET DIPLOMACY"

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED; NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION.

¶1. (SBU) Public reaction following the unsuccessful presidential talks on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict February 10-11 in Rambouillet, France, has been predictable. While the international press had billed the talks as having the possibility for a break-through, most Azerbaijanis remained cynical that significant, or even minor agreements would be achieved. Therefore, following the talks most politologues and average Azerbaijanis expressed little surprise and much cynicism at the outcome of the negotiations.

¶2. (U) Public reaction here immediately seized on a report broadcast by ANS television from Rambouillet that President Kocharian broke off the talks abruptly "to go to the restroom," and that he was quickly followed out by Russian Co-Chair Merzylakov. According to ANS, the talks ground to a halt shortly after the bathroom break. This so-called "toilet diplomacy" has been interpreted widely as the Russians having given Kocharian permission to be unreasonable and refuse to negotiate. Presidential adviser Novruz Mammadov was quoted as saying of Kocharian that, "A leader has to act seriously and responsibly. What are the people of his own country going to think of him after this?" Azerbaijanis, who have long accused Russia of supporting Armenia during the conflict, also still suspect that the Russian Co-Chair is biased towards Armenia. Akif Naghi, Chairman of the Karabakh Liberation Organization, told ANS television that Kocharian's move showed that Armenia does not have a position of its own and merely acts on Russia's orders. Independent analyst and former opposition member Rasim Musabayov approvingly attributed the result to Azerbaijan's firm position on territorial integrity and questioned Armenia's ability to reach an agreement in that framework.

¶3. (SBU) Most opposition political leaders also focused on Kocharian's actions, stating that it proved the close and intransigent Armenian and Russian positions. Ali Kerimli, chairman of the Popular Front Party, stated that "Armenians will always find excuses." Opposition leader Eldar Namazov voiced little surprise at the outcome, saying he expected this round of negotiations to follow a similar track as every other round (i.e. without substantive results). Musavat Party Deputy Chairman Sulhaddin Akbar told us that he does not expect a breakthrough to be forthcoming unless a new balance of power emerges in the region. He also said the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs should have a unified position so as to present, in fact, a united front. However, more radical opposition leader Iskender Hamidov, Chairman of the National Democratic Party (formerly the Grey Wolves Party) dismissed outright the Minsk Group process. He said the actions of the Russian Co-Chair demonstrated

that the three co-chairs have no interest in the principle of justice and that Azerbaijan must act in its own interest to resolve the conflict, with force if necessary.

¶4. (SBU) While the majority of Azerbaijanis did not appear to expect much from the most recent round of N-K negotiations, many have expressed frustration at the hype every time that "this could be it," but once again having their hopes of progress dashed. From the talk around town we have heard in the past two weeks, it seems that the average Azerbaijani may be becoming increasingly cynical about the prospects for a peaceful and, in their view, "just" resolution to the conflict. This, however, gives more radical elements in society a broader platform to proclaim at best that someone must force Armenia to the table, which means either changing Russia's position or mitigating its influence. At worst, some elements such as the Karabakh Liberation Organization and other radical groups, espouse force to resolve the conflict.

HARNISH